Meaning Transfer Through Celebrities in the WNBA: Examining Organizational Image & Perceived Athletic Ability

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Despite being the most successful women's league, the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) has suffered from fan perceptions of being less skilled and an unattractive product (Johnson, 2018). Accordingly, the WNBA has strived to highlight athletes' skills. To enhance the WNBA's image, this study considers celebrities' effects as culturally pervasive images integral to our daily lives (Turner, 2004).

Organizational image is a symbolic representation of an organization communicated to influence perceptions (Gioia, Hamilton, & Patvardhan, 2014). An organization with a favorable image will reap desirable outcomes (Dutton, 1994). Celebrity endorsers' positive meanings for individuals can create positive perceptions of an organization. According to McCracken (1989), celebrities possess a range of unique cultural meanings which can be transferred to consumers through a product. According to meaning transfer theory, if consumers are aware of a celebrity's support of the WNBA, they will appropriate the celebrity's presented meaning by advocating the WNBA. Thus, a celebrity whose identity as a fan is highlighted in WNBA games and impressed upon consumers should positively impact consumer perceptions of the WNBA.

The purpose of this study is to investigate how celebrity fan types (entertainers/athletes) can lend the WNBA greater credibility through the meaning transfer model. The transfer of celebrities' cultural meanings to the league should enhance the image of the WNBA. Also, despite the media's trivialization of female athleticism (Messner, 2002), consumers may appreciate athleticism when influential fans are associated with the WNBA. Celebrities' highlighted attendance, enjoyment of the game, and appreciation of players' skill and athleticism may influence consumers' perceptions of players' athleticism. This leads to the following research questions: What influence does each celebrity fan type have on organizational image? What influence does a celebrity fan type have on perceived athleticism? Does participants' gender influence these relationships?

A pretest will be conducted to select appropriate celebrities capable of improving the WNBA's image. Participants, recruited by Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), will be individuals with a range of interest in the WNBA (non-consumers, spectators and fans). They will be given pictures and profiles of celebrities attending WNBA games and, in line with the theory, be asked, “Which celebrity resonates with you as a strong advocate of the WNBA?” They will choose their four top celebrities.

Next, the effectiveness of each fan type will be assessed by a 3x2 experiment: fan type (athlete vs. entertainer vs. control group) by participant gender. Participants will be randomly assigned a condition and shown a celebrity fan’s interview describing the excitement of a WNBA game and the players' skills. Participants in the control group will not be manipulated. Participants will then complete a questionnaire, which will include an organization image scale (Javalgi et al., 1994), and an expertise scale (Ohanian, 1990) to assess player athleticism. MANOVA will be used to identify interaction effects between participant gender and celebrity fan types on WNBA image and perceived athleticism.

This study will augment the meaning transfer theory by identifying which celebrity fan types create meaning and transfer to different consumers, enhancing organizational image and perceived athleticism.